

## Film Festival

# Uncommon Places In Avant-Garde Trilogy

By CARYN JAMES

When the three film makers represented in the New York Film Festival's "Avant-Garde Visions" program took questions after the press screening, the first one was, "Do your titles mean anything?" Whether this question was mischievously philistine or just inarticulate, the panel's moderator repeated it in a delicately rephrased form: "Would you talk about the meaning of your titles?"

The difference involves more than good manners or semantics; anyone who wants to parse films for conventional messages should look elsewhere, for none of these films operates on the jigsaw-puzzle principle — reshuffle the fragmented narrative and see what the picture means. But at their best, in Warren Sonbert's "Friendly Witness" and Pat O'Neill's "Water and Power," they are suggestive in the manner of abstract paintings, and yield some new idea or emotion with each viewing.

With a sense of humor and music you can dance to, Mr. Sonbert's film is joyful enough to be an advertisement for the avant-garde. Though he has created only silent films over the last 20 years, "Friendly Witness" is set to music as slippery as the film's title (with its appealing literal meaning and disturbing political connotations). Beginning with Carole King's "Will You Still Love Me Tomorrow?" and running through upbeat early-60's songs like "Please Mr. Postman," the film offers scenes Mr. Sonbert has collected on his travels around the world, from Manhattan

streets to the Sphinx and the Taj Mahal.

There are sunny images of an amusement park, with go-carts and Tilt-a-Whirls. Boats glide across a lake, and people in old hippie clothes at an outdoor wedding seem captured in some ancient era. But like the songs — whose worried lyrics pull against their cheerful sound — there is an undercurrent of more somber images, like religious icons, hearses, soldiers.

In its last section, "Friendly Witness" is set to music by Gluck, the lyricism and tension of which enhances the film's darkening tone. The balance of joyful and sobering images shifts; interspersed with peacocks and ice skaters are more scenes of police and of obviously poor people crowding into some Middle Eastern bazaar.

In a style that is recognizably Mr. Sonbert's, each image leads into the perfectly selected middle of some story whose beginning and end we will never see. But even while viewers must race to keep up with Mr. Sonbert's images, each a few seconds long, the film has a leisurely, graceful feel. Despite its accessible surface, "Friendly Witness" captures a complex sense of the exotic and the ordinary in life.

Mr. O'Neill's "Water and Power" is much tougher going. Where "Friendly Witness" entices viewers to enter its world, "Water and Power" layers images on top of one another — there are computer-generated graphics, stop-motion scenes, multiple exposures — so that the film's surface seems about to explode. The central images of the film, which was shot in and near Los Angeles, are of city traffic, the surrounding desert area and the huge pipelines that bring to mind how water rights and political power have mixed throughout history.

But Mr. O'Neill's major concern is the power of film to redefine and control all images, even natural ones.



A scene from "Friendly Witness," one of the films in the New York Film Festival trilogy "Avant-Garde Visions."

Sunlight, sped up and enhanced, comes through the window of a shabby, empty room as if Mr. O'Neill had dramatized an Edward Hopper painting. Clouds race around window frames like a Magritte canvas brought to life. A clip from an old film shows Moses parting the Red Sea.

People are silhouettes here, either ghostly white or in bright primary colors. Superimposed images of a blue man, a red dog and a glowing yellow sun seem to race out of a calm body of water. At other times, only text appears on screen as a voice reads a story about 19th-century settlers taking the Indians' land. At 57 minutes long, "Water and Power" is repetitious, but it is a provocative, ambitious and visually stunning essay.

Abigail Child's 10-minute-long "Mercy" is an appropriate but obvious start to the program. Ms. Child,

too, is concerned with the way shape us and vice versa. She found film, including bits of television commercials, to understand assumptions about male and female images and consumerism. It feels to see your son returning home, of a boy grappling with a steer wrestling. In the background, a ordinary-looking city scene, photographs of Elizabeth Taylor, her perfume, film-store window. Ms. Child to challenge the mercenary stereotypes have on our time. Her film itself is not gripping to be totally effective.

"Avant Garde Visions" shown tonight at 6 P.M. at the Hall as part of the New York Film Festival.

## Three Viewpoints

AVANT-GARDE VISIONS, "Mercy," by Abigail Child, 10 minutes; "Friendly Witness," by Warren Sonbert, 28 minutes; "Water and Power," by Pat O'Neill, 57 minutes. At Alice Tully Hall, as part of the 27th New York Film Festival. These films have no rating.

# A Trip Into the Middle Ages, and a View of Lar

By CARYN JAMES

Both Meredith Monk's "Book of Days" and Isaac Julien's "Looking for Langston" are strong-minded films that juxtapose the past and the present; that is all they have in com-

and-white version of the scene. A cobblestone road curves into the distance and white-robed men and women seem to glide through a marketplace.

Though the black-and-white photography distances viewers from the past, the present constantly intrudes. In one of Ms. Monk's less graceful

## Seek and Hide

LOOKING FOR LANGSTON, directed by Isaac Julien; photography by Nina Kellgren; edited by Robert Hargreaves; art director, Derek Brown; produced by Nadine Marsh-Edwards; production company, Sankofa Film and Video and the British Film Institute. Running time, 40 minutes. This film has no rat-

suits and Ray-Bans host a medieval square, featuring a glider and backup singers transported from a SoHo film regains its poise when attacks the village, the blame the Jews, and the world seems to go up in flames of hatred and disc-